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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the merits and limitations of using both fiction and nonfiction films and videos to teach issues related to gender (especially issues of appearance, dieting, aging, abuse, rape, and power relationships between the sexes) in gender communication courses (and by extension, other communication courses, such as interpersonal communication). The paper explores the benefits and problems associated with the use of controversial media in such classes, especially media texts which have generated debates about gender in the popular press. Such media texts include various feature films (e.g. "Thelma and Louise," "The First Wives Club," "The Accused," "The War of the Roses," "The Color Purple," "In the Company of Men"; television series (e.g. "Absolutely Fabulous," "Roseanne"); and documentary videos (e.g. "Dreamworlds II" and "Slim Hopes"). Limiting discussion to a selected few of the above (for manageability), the course can explore objectives and strategies for using controversial media, including dealing with student resistance and/or emotional responses, based on experiences in using these and other media texts in communication classes. Contains 56 references. Sample questions for use in class for "Absolutely Fabulous," "Slim Hopes," "Thelma and Louise," and "Dreamworlds II" are appended. (Author)

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USING CONTROVERSIAL MEDIA TO TEACH ISSUES ABOUT GENDER

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the merits and limitations of using both fiction and non-fiction films and videos to teach issues related to gender (especially issues of appearance, dieting, aging, abuse, rape, and power relationships between the sexes) in gender communication courses (and by extension, other communication courses, such as interpersonal communication). The paper explores the benefits and problems associated with the use of controversial media in such classes, especially media texts which have generated debates about gender in the popular press. Such media texts include various feature films (e.g. Thelma and Louise, The First Wives Club, The Accused, The War of the Roses, The Color Purple, In the Company of Men, etc.), television series (e.g. Absolutely Fabulous, Roseanne, etc.), and documentary videos (e.g. Dreamworlds II and Slim Hopes, etc.). Limiting my discussion to a selected few of the above (for manageability), I explore objectives and strategies for using controversial media, including dealing with student resistance and/or emotional responses, based on my experiences in using these and other media texts in communication classes.

USING CONTROVERSIAL MEDIA TO TEACH ISSUES ABOUT GENDER

It should come as no surprise that those who teach communication courses often use film and video examples as pedagogical tools to help explain, clarify, and apply classroom concepts for their students. Indeed, many have argued that the use of media, especially film and television programs, in the classroom can be key to improved understanding and enrichment in both interpersonal and gender communication (e.g. Shields and Kidds, 1973; Jensen, 1981; Haefner and Metts, 1990; Proctor and Adler, 1991; Vande Berg, 1991; Winegarden, Fuss-Reineck and Charron, 1993). This view is supported by Gumpert and Cathcart (1986). In Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communication in a Media World, they claim "it is misleading to study interpersonal communication and pretend that media do not influence the nature of the phenomenon" (p. v). As Gumpert and Cathcart state

> Just the time alone that we devote to media must have a profound effect on our interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the process is cyclical. The media are dependent on us to alter our relationships to accommodate the media, and the media in turn present us with a picture of our altered relationships (p. 15).

In another essay, Cathcart and Gumpert (1983) argue that media both reflects and projects interpersonal behaviors, with individuals dependent upon media for the development of their self-images (p. 268).

According to Haefner and Metts, the effectiveness of media in the classroom is due to the relationship which exists between communication and media. They refer to both television and film when asserting that "media provide unique opportunities to observe otherwise inaccessible relational phenomena" (p. 14). Haefner and Metts argue that the interactions in media between people "are, at the very least, prototypes of interaction episodes enacted in real life, and as such, are reasonable domains of investigation for communication scholars" (p. 17). And at a time when many of us are concerned with student performance on course objectives, empirical evidence from both sociology and communication

indicates that students in courses using media learn as much as those in classes that don't use media (Baker & Lawrence, 1994; Smith 1973; Smith 1982).

Although this connection between media and communication is widely accepted, the trickier question of how to incorporate controversial media into communication classes, especially interpersonal and gender communication, has not been much addressed. By controversial media, I mean media which received disparate responses from reviewers and audiences, generating debates on "hot button" issues. For the context of this paper, such issues revolve around gender and its impact on our relationships. Media examples include, but are not limited to, feature films (e.g. Thelma and Louise, The First Wives Club, The Accused, In the Company of Men, The Color Purple, War of the Roses, etc.); television situation comedies (e.g. Absolutely Fabulous, Roseanne, etc.); and video documentaries (e.g. Dreamworlds II, Slim Hopes, etc.). Increasingly such films and videos are available for classroom use, and are being used by many to explore issues about gender. Others would use them with more concrete guidelines for use.

Therefore, the goals of this paper are to examine the pros and cons of classroom use of controversial media, and to provide some strategies for using such media in communication courses. Although I have used a variety of mediated texts over the years in disparate courses (ranging from interpersonal communication to women's studies), this paper is limited to four examples--the feature film Thelma and Louise, the British-import situation comedy Absolutely Fabulous, and the video documentaries Dreamworlds II and Slim Hopes--and how they can be used in one specific course, gender communication. This limitation primarily is for manageability (the issues raised often apply to other examples), although each of these explicitly deal with controversial gender-related issues, such as issues of appearance, dieting, aging, sexual abuse, rape/sexual assault, and power relations between the sexes, and have been viewed as controversial by both reviewers and general audiences.

After a short review of prior work in using media in the classroom, I present a rationale for using controversial media. Then I discuss my specific pedagogical use of the four controversial films and videos listed above, which I've shown in gender communication classes, which I teach every fall at a mid-sized regional comprehensive university located in the mid-west. I explore some of the ethical and emotional difficulties involved in incorporating such sensitive subjects into the classroom, discussing some pedagogical strategies for handling these difficulties, so as to enhance learning, and providing discussion questions for each one in appendices.

Review of Literature

While numerous communication scholars have advocated the use of media as a supplemental teaching tool in varied classroom situations, few have explored the use of media as a potential site of controversy. Most often, using media in the classroom is rationalized on the basis of factors such as student comfortability with media, and the idea that media provide a quasi-realistic illustration of "communication processes in action" (Procter, 1990, p. 4; see also Procter and Adler, 1991). While some have questioned the effectiveness of media portrayals (both film and television programs) in realistically portraying communication concepts, they still have supported limited use of media in the classroom. For example, Ulrich (1986) argued that while films were not accurate portrayals of communication theories, thus could not be used to test hypotheses about such theories, films could be used to "suggest new ways of looking at old problems" (p. 150). Fitzpatrick (1991) concluded that, despite difficulties in matching theory to media examples of marital interactions, students perceive they have gained useful information after examining television programs for a course assignment (p. 218).

Another early argument for the pedagogical use of media (novels, plays, and films), specifically tied to interpersonal communication, was made by Jensen (1981). His purpose was to "offer examples of theoretical concepts which can be illustrated through literature and popular film" (p. 3). Jensen concludes that "film can help us to better understand and appreciate the intricacies of human

communication" (p. 12). In the same time period, Shields and Kidd (1973) looked at the use of The Poseidon Adventure to illustrate small group communication principles. Their article supports the use of media as a teaching tool, since "speech communication theory attempts to explain communication in society, and film attempts artistically to reproduce communication on the screen" (p. 201). They conclude that popular films can be used "to enhance student understanding of communication theory, to stimulate discussion and research questions, and to serve as the basis for a variety of student assignments" (p. 207).

Proctor (1991) also examined the use of films in small group communication, exploring how Twelve Angry Men and The Breakfast Club illustrate group processes such as persuasion, role emergence, and conflict management. By suggesting the use of discussion questions and critical essays, Proctor demonstrates concretely how media can be effective in obtaining understanding of course concepts. Although brief, his article provides both an application and a rationale for the regular use of film in the communication classroom.

In their pilot study of the use of media as a primary pedagogical methodology in teaching interpersonal communication, Baker and Lawrence (1994) make a preliminary attempt to measure the effectiveness of media in helping students achieve course outcomes. Students in two experimental interpersonal communication classes watched seven full-length feature films and two television programs, and related these media texts to interpersonal concepts. Results indicated that students achieved the course objectives in a satisfactory manner, comparable to classes where media wasn't used.

A review essay by Winegarden, Fuss-Reineck, and Charron (1993) explores media use in the classroom, specifically focusing on providing a rationale for using television programs, especially Star Trek: The Next Generation, to teach basic communication concepts such as persuasion, family communication, and ethics. They conclude that "the insight and knowledge students receive in class

should be directly applicable and relevant to their lives" (p. 187). However, they do not grapple with potential controversial issues about gender raised by watching Star Trek (or any television program).

Vande Berg (1991) explores the use of media to teach courses in gender and communication, noting that using television programs in the classroom provide both "equipment for living" and a versatile teaching tool (p. 106, citing Brummett 1985). Vande Berg argues that such programs "are designed to exnominate yet evoke, activate, reference, and occasionally challenge mainstream social myths, policies, and beliefs," especially as regards issues of diversity (p. 105). Vande Berg makes a solid case for extensive application of media in the classroom, providing useful suggestions for how to incorporate various television shows into courses in gender and communication. However, she does not specifically focus on the difficulties of using controversial media in the gender communication class.

Rationale for Using Controversial Media

From this brief review, it seems clear that most communication teachers would agree that using films and videos in the classroom are a good idea. There is also some recognition that using current popular films can create some problems. Procter and Adler warn that since "feature films are entertaining, students may at times lose sight of the educational agenda" (p. 395). Maynard (1971) also observes that popular films may not be viewed as educational. He suggests that films should be chosen which "have some basic relationship to the students' own experiences, to give them some basic something with which to identify" (p. 214). Using controversial media exacerbates these problems, while adding in new concerns about how students will respond to such media. There are good chances that at least some students will be offended, or become upset when shown controversial films and videos.

One might ask, why bother at all with media that provokes controversy, both in the general public and among students? The answer is that such texts often illustrate issues of vital concern for students, especially female students. These issues often emerge in the interpersonal and gender classroom whenever the focus turns to male-female relationships. It is a truism that one out of two marriages in

the United States ends in divorce. Further, statistics on rape, spousal abuse, and other interpersonal violence keep increasing. The Women's Action Coalition (Wac Stats, 1993) reports that in the U.S. "a woman is raped every 1.3 minutes" (p. 49). During her lifetime, one out of every three women will be victimized by sexual assault (p. 49). One survey noted that 51% of college men said they would rape if they were sure they could get away with it (cited in Caputi et al., 1990). Further, in the U.S. a woman is a victim of domestic assault every 15 seconds, with such battering "the greatest single cause of injury to women in the U.S., more than . . . car accidents, rapes, and muggings combined" (WAC Stats, p. 55). If such frightening statistics are to be reduced, I believe it is imperative to address such volatile issues as rape and sexual assault in those classes which seek to improve communication skills.

Additionally, many students, especially female students, struggle with self-esteem issues about appearance, weight control, health, and aging. Women in particular must confront the fact that appearance counts heavily in creating and maintaining all types of relationships. Julia T. Wood (1997) observes there is a "cultural mandate to be thin" which is reflected in all kinds of eating disorders (p. 202). Naomi Wolf (1991) notes that most women in the U.S. are either dieting, just finished dieting, or planning to start diets (p. 186). Further, the percentage of secondary school girls who believe they are overweight has risen significantly over the years (Wolf, p. 186). Seligmann et. al. (1987) report that girls as young as nine or ten years old are dieting to fit cultural ideals of thinness (many of which are promoted by the media). Many women believe they are overweight when, medically speaking, they are not; indeed, they may be underweight (WAC Stats, p. 20). According to J.J. Brumberg (1988), eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia are endemic among American college women. Media texts which explore these issues can lead to fruitful discussions about the necessity of meeting a particular ideal standard of beauty, as well as prod students to express additional concerns about aging and relational health issues (especially sexually transmitted diseases, but also other medical problems). Thus it seems both reasonable and prudent to employ such media texts.

Yet, even though the use of controversial media in the classroom can be justified on pedagogical grounds, there is no question that such media can cause difficulties, many of them ethical in nature. A large number of students may find such media to be uncomfortable or offensive to watch, because it creates cognitive dissonance in them. Others may become upset because the issues "hit home" for them (particularly those students who have been victimized by rape or sexual assault). Concerns about privacy exist--how much must a student self-disclose in an often heated discussion of these issues? In exposing students to controversies, will tensions explode further? As Baker and Benton (1994) observe, any act of disclosure is both empowering and violating, and we are not always able to predict how we and others will react to our revelations. How much can the teacher protect students from the fallout of classrooom discussion on sensitive subjects (not only their psyches, but also their physical well-being)? For example, should we encourage students to confront abusive partners? Or to reveal personal traumas?

I've never found these questions easy to answer; often such questions arise in both interpersonal and gender communication classes regardless of whether media texts are shown or not. I often worry that in using controversial media I place an excessively uncomfortable spotlight on my students, excaberating rather than resolving problems. Yet, over and over, my students tell me otherwise; in many cases students reveal that finally the taboos about speaking on such issues have been broken, with the students benefitting from being able to air difficult and painful concerns in a relatively safe place. I've learned from my own twenty year experience in teaching such courses that how such activities are presented and debriefed are important factors in determining the most ethical ways in which to approach these concerns.

The next sections of this paper provide my suggestions for using four specific examples of controversial media in the gender communication classroom. I cannot provide definitive answers to problematic and ethical dilemmas surrounding the use of potentially offensive and sensitive materials (whether mediated or not). Instead, I share what often has worked for me in the past, as well as

suggestions gleaned from others, both students and colleagues, in the hopes it will aid others in using such sensitive media in their classrooms.

Pedagogical Applications

As I teach it, gender communication is a course which examines how gender influences communication patterns, masculine and feminine roles, differences in female and male symbolic codes, verbal and non-verbal interactions across a variety of contexts, relational styles, cultural influences on gender communication, plus various issues in same and opposite sex communication. It also critically examines media stereotypes, to help students understand the effects of such stereotypes on their self-images and relationships. I use two main texts in the class: Julia Wood, Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender and Culture, 2nd edition (1997); and Deborah Tannen, You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation (1990), plus additional readings drawn from both academic journals and the popular press. These readings deal with the issues addressed in the controversial media that I show in class.

Deciding what films or television programs to show to students is always difficult, and it is more so whenever controversial issues emerge. For the ease of discussion, I've lumped comparable media texts together, but I've never shown all four media texts to one specific class, as that would be overwhelming (both in terms of course organization and student responses). The choices I make in any particular class are dependent to some extent on what is available. Most current feature films are available through video-rental outlets, with some available from the university library. A university library also can be a source of documentary films like Slim Hopes (or Still Killing Us Softly). My department owns a copy of Dreamworlds II, and I have personal copies of many feature films. Television shows can be taped off the air; however, because of possible violation of copyright law, I only use such taped episodes one time, since, as Winegarden, Fuss-Reineck, and Charron point out, "it is illegal to record programs off the air

and continue to use them in the classroom without getting permission to do so in a reasonable amount of time" (p. 180; see also Procter & Adler, p. 398). To meet the "fair use" test, I have, where possible, purchased applicable television shows (e.g. Absolutely Fabulous).

I have arranged this section by the two primary issues related to gender covered in both interpersonal and gender communication classes. The first issue is that of physical concerns about appearance, weight, aging, etc. The second issue involves the dynamics of interpersonal relationships between the sexes, especially concerns about intimacy, control and sexual violence (e.g. rape, sexual abuse, domestic assault, etc.). For each issue, I describe the media text(s) which best apply to it, along with potential strategies for using the media text(s) in the classroom.

Issues about Appearance and Aging

One of the first issues that comes up in both gender and interpersonal communication courses is body image, especially the pressures on women to look a particular way, and how that is reinforced through the media. There are two main texts that I use to explore these issues--the "Fat" episode of the situation comedy Absolutely Fabulous (1993), and the documentary Slim Hopes (1995). Both have the advantage of being only thirty minutes long, thus easy to show in one class period.

Absolutely Fabulous (AbFab for short) is a comedy series which ran in Britain from 1993-1995, attracting more than ten million viewers, and winning several awards, including two BAFTAs (the British equivalent of an Emmy), three British Comedy Awards, and an award to Jennifer Saunders (the creator) from Women in Film and TV. It satirizes the fashion and public relations world, as well as providing insight into female issues and friendships. While often funny, it raises disturbing issues. And there is no question that AbFab is offensive in its representation of its two main characters, Edina Monsoon and Patsy Stone, as obnoxious, drug-taking, chain-smoking, alcoholic, neurotic, devious, manipulative, and sexually promiscuous women. Jennifer Saunders, the creator of AbFab, says they are meant to have no

redeeming qualities. While this breaks stereotyped expectations for women's behavior, the two characters also reinforce stereotypes in their exaggerated concerns for appearance and their dependence upon men.

Many in the British press claimed that AbFab would not be shown in America because of its "politically incorrect" content. The Mail on Sunday (9 January 1993) said that the show had been "banned in America." They quoted Saunders as saying "In England people are fed up with being good all the time, but in America they won't show it. . . . The only way the series will get a look-in the States is if the characters are really toned down" (p. 21). However, when the show finally debuted in 1995 on the U.S. cable channel Comedy Central, it became a smash hit. The entire three series of BBC videos are now available in U.S. format for home consumption (along with the final two-hour movie). In addition, U.S. comic Roseanne obtained the rights to make an American version, and turned the last season of her own sitcom into a toned-down version (Saunders and Lumley even guest starred as Edina and Patsy for the 1996 Halloween episode). AbFab's influence is also felt in the sitcom Cybill. Its brand of outrageous humor apparently also inspired both the British and U.S. versions of Men Behaving Badly.

Before showing the "Fat" episode (or any media text), I discuss with my students some relevant concepts on deconstructing media imagery. I introduce them to Stuart Hall's 1980 theory about the three ways audiences decode messages--the preferred, the negotiated, and the oppositional. I also discuss Walter Fisher's 1970 "motive view of communication," which looks at four functions of communication-to affirm an image, to reaffirm an image, to purify an image, and to subvert an image. We explore how comedy in particular works to both reaffirm and subvert images. Then I provide some background on the series, and give students a handout explaining the characters, as well as a set of questions to ponder as they watch the video (see Appendix A). I stress to students the need to be aware that this episode of AbFab has several repugnant scenes. There is a graphic and gruesome dream sequence, revolving around the use of liposuction to remove fat, and the injection of collagen into a woman's lips to make them fuller. Both of these are controversial procedures, dangerous to one's health. In this episode of AbFab,

Edina literally wants hips the size of a doll's; in the process, her legs shrivel up and disappear. Then her lips are injected with a large, phallic needle, which blows them up to a huge size. In addition, there is cruel humor at the expense of someone visually impaired. By showing this episode of AbFab, I stress to students that I am not endorsing the use of such imagery, but that my goal is to confront the hidden subtexts in popular shows in a critical way, interrogating the use of such imagery beyond one's immediate reactions.

In looking at the issues raised by Absolutely Fabulous in general, and the "Fat" episode in particular, I stress the messages it sends about gender-roles in Western culture. The fact that it is written by women, and has two women leads, and has concern for women's issues, makes it an appropriate artifact to analyze in a communication (or women's studies) classroom. Since AbFab is meant to be a parody of the fashion and PR business, it caricaturizes women who are slaves to fashion trends. In particular, the episode "Fat" deals with issues surrounding size, appearance, fashion, and dieting that concern all women. As a comedy, AbFab treats these women's issues in a satiric way. Satire and parody are often seen as subverting the dominant beliefs of a culture. As John Fiske (1986) observes, such humor provides the grounding for critical exploration of ideas because such strategies work "by simultaneously opposing meanings against each other" (p. 400; see also Baker, 1996). Like Roseanne, Edina and Patsy can be seen as "unruly women." Kathleen Rowe (1996) notes that while such women often reinforce tradition, they also model disobedience to tradition, becoming "a source of danger for threatening the conceptual categories which organize our lives" (p. 83). In this way, "the parodic excesses of the unruly woman and the comic conventions surrounding her provide a space to act out the dilemmas of femininity," to make such dilemmas laughable (p. 83).

After we've watched the "Fat" episode in class, I conduct a class discussion on these questions. If there are too many in the class (as is often the case in gender communication), I break the class into four or five groups, and divide the questions among them. After a 10-15 minute discussion, each group

reports back to the whole class, and we have a broader discussion of the themes and issues raised by the show. Despite the fact it is set in Britain, most U.S. female students relate directly to the struggles of Edina to lose a few pounds to impress a thin friend, despite the fact she isn't very overweight. Western women are terrified of gaining weight, trying to meet an ideal standard of female beauty. Susan Brownmiller (1994) argues that the "natural tendency of the female to acquire substantial, if wobbly, mass runs counter to the preferred ideal of delicate shapeliness" that characterizes proper femininity (pp. 32-33). Patricia Mellencamp (1992) notes that "in U.S. culture, the ideal body . . . is a youthful thin body, airbrushed of blemishes, lines, and wrinkles" such as model Kate Moss (p. 279). Rowe (1995) argues that fatness is a "significant issue for women, and perhaps patriarchy nowhere inscribes itself more insidiously and viciously on female bodies than in the cult of thinness" (p. 85). By examining these assumptions after showing the "Fat" episode of AbFab, I have found that students begin sharing their own struggles with weight. Many male students have also profited, because they've been able to link the discussion to the struggles of women they know (or their own attempts to meet some type of ideal for physical perfection).

This discussion can be facilitated further by the use of the Jean Kilbourne's video documentary Slim Hopes: Advertising and the Obsession With Thinness. As with her earlier video, Still Killing Us Softly, Kilbourne interrogates the use of advertising images to promote a particular world view. In the case of Slim Hopes, it is the limited and constraining view that women must be thin, with additional themes related to the contradictory portrayals of food as both a mood-enhancing drug that provides a quasi-sexual pleasure, and taboo sin which "good girls" (i.e. thin girls) avoid as much as possible (hence bolstering the billion dollar diet industry). Kilbourne decisively demonstrates how the ideal woman is an impossible (and unrealistic) goal for most women, and offers an analysis of how advertising images affect both women's self-esteem and their health. Slim Hopes, at just thirty minutes long, can easily fit

into most class schedules, providing a devastating critique of both fashion advertising and the weight-loss industry.

Therefore, prior to showing Slim Hopes in class, I "set the stage" for discussion by requiring that students read two selections about advertisements from Dines and Humez, Eds. (1995), Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text Reader (these readings are in addition to assigned reading from Wood's textbook). I also present a lecture on media effects, introducing the students to the concept of the symbolic annilihation of women by the media (see Tuchman, 1978). I provide a set of questions to guide their viewing, and, as with the prior example, we discuss those questions after I've shown the video in class (see Appendix B). Usually there is a lively discussion both agreeing and disagreeing with Kilbourne. Although not as gut-wrenching as the Dreamworlds II video, Slim Hopes produces a strong reaction from viewers. Because Kilbourne's critique is so compelling and concise, students tend to resist her message, arguing that it exaggerated, or that it puts too much emphasis on media images. Most college-age men and women subscribe to the often mistaken belief that they are too savvy for advertising to have any effect on them. This leads to a discussion of both the strengths and limits of research into media effects. In addition, young women who suffer (or have suffered) from eating disorders tend to argue with her conclusions about the impact of advertising on such eating disorders, noting that the causes of anorexia, and bulimia are complex. At this point I usually reveal my own battle with anorexia when I was an undergraduate, and how media images of the late 60's exacerbated my condition.
This self-disclosure not only enhances my credibility, but also permits students to open up more fully, as they reveal either their own struggles, or those of someone they know. We conclude the discussion with a brainstorming of strategies to resist false or overly idealized media images.

Relationship Issues

Gender communication courses, like interpersonal communication courses, usually devote a large proportion of class time discussing relationships, both cross-sex and same-sex. There are numerous films

(and television shows) which deal with gendered relationships, from the relatively non-controversial When Harry Met Sally (often useful for demonstrating the problems of male-female friendship, or to illustrate relationship stages) to the outrageous black comedy of The War of the Roses (which also illustrates relational stages, but which can be dismissed by students as being too far out). Although I have shown both those films (with varying degrees of success), I also show films such as The Accused or Thelma and Louise which include issues of power and violence in with their depiction of relationships. Such films usually cause far more dissonance in students. Since a segment of The Accused is included in Dreamworlds II, I will focus my discussion on Thelma and Louise, a popular film which can be approached from several angles--as dealing with relational power issues between women and men, as a film about female bonding and friendship, as an argument against sexual violence/rape, and as a quasi-western road trip (usually considered a male genre). Like many other relational films, Thelma and Louise can illustrate a number of interpersonal concepts, including friendship stages, control v. intimacy in relationships, dialectical tensions (between affection and instrumentality, judgment and acceptance, expressiveness and protectiveness), and conflict management (Littlejohn & Gray, 1996, pp. 243-244).

Few recent films have been so publicly controversial as Thelma and Louise. It opened quietly in May 1991, and received mostly positive reviews. Soon it was a moderate box office success, especially in urban areas. However, as the summer progressed, several male writers began criticizing the film as a type of fascistic "toxic feminism" (Leo, June 10, 1991, p. 20) which engaged in "male-bashing" (see Schickel, June 24, 1991). Several women also argued that the film betrayed feminist values (Benson, May 31, 1991; Carlson, June 24, 1991), condemning the film for its "odd, fatalistic portrait of these two women as defined by rape" (Dowell, December 1991, p. 29). Such rhetoric quickly garnered a counter-response, leading to a special issue of Time magazine exploring the debate. Ty Burr, in Entertainment Weekly (January 10, 1991), observed that "something in this movie digs deep into the unease that men and women feel when they look at each other and see aliens" (p. 73).

Thelma and Louise clearly is a complex narrative, one which both galvanized and repulsed many spectators, both female and male (Baker, 1993, p. 4). As Harvey Greenberg (1991) points out, "big, popular entertainments like Thelma and Louise often contain both reactionary and progressive elements, more or less ajar" (p. 20). These contradictory and ambiguous elements are partly what makes the film a useful tool for class discussion--students interpret the action in a variety of ways, and can become engaged in a productive exploration of their own expectations (and limits) in relationships. Non-traditional female friendships are affirmed, along with personal values regarding romantic relationships.

To prepare students for viewing this film, I not only discuss concepts about audience and motives (see above), I also require them to read a recent article on female friendships (Johnson, 1996) and direct them to a collection of reviews (both from the popular press and from film journals), which mark out the key themes of the debates surrounding this film. I also provide them with a set of questions to help guide their viewing, along with a list of characters (see Appendix C; sometimes I describe the plot, though many already have seen the film). Because Thelma and Louise is two hours and 10 minutes in length, it sometimes takes two class periods to show, and a third class period for discussion of the questions. Again, this discussion may take several forms. One is to have students free-write a reaction immediately after viewing the film, then to use that writing during the next class meeting to generate themes or issues related to power and violence in relationships during a whole-class discussion. Or, I might break them into small groups, and have each group answer two or three of the questions, to be shared later with the whole class.

Usually the discussion does not stay with the questions, but instead focuses on student identification with the main characters. The ending suicide usually generates a lot of arguments (was it a sell-out or something liberating? Should Thelma have slept with J.D. so soon after being nearly raped? etc.). Stereotypes of women and men are explored, especially the ways in which the film plays with those stereotypes (for example, the FBI men like to watch soap operas). Students observe that the

friendship between Thelma and Louise violates some of the themes for female friendships--it is "typically centered in conversation" (Johnson, p. 82), nor is intimacy cultivated through dialogue (Johnson, p. 83); indeed, Louise resists self disclosure about what happened to her in Texas. This can lead into a discussion about the last theme, which notes the complexity of women's friendships, and that not all such friendships fit the norm. Sometimes students make the connection that Thelma and Louise's friendship seems to fit male models of friendship more than female (more doing than talking), except that they are very supportive of one another. This can lead into a profitable discussion about androgyny and its benefits. The final kiss between the two women at the end may also provoke a discussion about lesbian friendships. In addition, some students pick up on the film techniques, especially what one reviewer called "an anthology of phallic symbolism," comprised of "driving rain, crop dusting, spewing oil derricks," and big trucks (Abrams 1991). They debate the social significance of these symbols and wonder what message the director was trying convey by using them. We explore whether these are representative elements of the threatening male world that Thelma and Louise are trying to escape, which leads into debates as to whether or not male-female relationships are characterized by violence. Later some of these students tell me that they watch movies differently, with a more critical eye, which I view as a positive outcome.

Issues of Sexual Violence

Another approach to issues of media effects on gendered violence is to show the video documentary Dreamworlds II: Desire, Sex, and Power in Music Videos (1995). Dreamworlds II is a documentary of rock music videos (from MTV and others). It shows images from popular rock videos, "rearranged and recontextualized, to highlight issues of sexual violence, date rape, and the relationship between video images of women and these prevalent problems" (Bruess, 1995, p. 102). Written from a cultural studies perspective, this documentary graphically demonstrates how rock videos are produced

and marketed to reinforce male adolescent sexual fantasies about women. It also argues that these fantasies are tied to messages about female objectification and violence toward women.

Dreamworlds II incorporates and deconstructs over 200 music videos, taking them out of their normal context, substituting Sut Jhally's narration for the music, and ordering them so that they make a compelling argument about the "dreamworld" story told in these videos about female sexuality. The narrative, coupled with the continuous, almost mind-numbing, video segments takes us from the use of women as simple fantasy figures of desire to "implicit and explicit messages supportive of sexual violence and abuse, and the reinforcement of attitudes permissive of such assaults as 'date rape'" (MEF Catalog 1997, p. 6). As Christopher C. Inman and Julia T. Wood observe in Teaching Gendered Lives (2nd Ed. 1997), it "presents offensive and violent images in a very powerful way" (p. 73). This includes the inclusion of the rape scene from The Accused, which is intercut with images taken from similar rock videos. Then statistics on rape and sexual violence are presented. The end result is highly disturbing, and often leaves viewers stunned and silent. Unless students are prepared in advance for this video, they will find it difficult to watch. The video tells students they can leave if it becomes too upsetting, an admonition I reinforce by permitting students to do an alternative assignment, as described in the syllabus for the course:

> Controversial subjects will be discussed in this class, and personal information may be revealed; please demonstrate respect for the ideas and values of your colleagues through courteous discussion; in addition, please keep personal information confidential. As we discuss controversial issues, some discomfort should be expected, as it is difficult to learn anything new without experiencing some dissonance; however, if at any time you feel excessive distress over the material, please feel free to ask for an alternative assignment.

In multiple showings of this documentary over the past two years, only two students (both female) have taken advantage of this alternative assignment.

To help prepare students for watching Dreamworlds II, I have them read applicable material in their text (and/or provide additional statistics on violence and date rape), as well as have them read chapter 2 from The Power of the Image by Annette Kuhn, which discusses the images of women in pornography. Again, I provide them with a set of questions to aid viewing (see Appendix D). After the video ends, I often have students free-write a response for a few minutes. Then, I usually have the class break up into small groups (three to five students) to help them process the information. I assign each group a couple of the questions to get the discussion started. After about twenty minutes, we share the key themes of these discussions with each other, as a whole class. Even with preparation many who watch the documentary will resist the message it presents about rock videos. Other students reveal their own experiences with sexual abuse and violence. In those cases, I always try to be there to affirm the student, to share my own experiences with an abusive ex-spouse, and to provide referrals, if necessary (referrals have included our college counselors, the campus police, and the local adult abuse shelter).

Although some students resist the arguments made by Jhally, insisting that the images have little or no effect on them, many other students later report that they are now watching videos in a new and enlightened way. As students begin to share personal stories related to watching MTV, many note how they never paid any attention to it previously, but they will in the future, because the video has "opened their eyes." Indeed, some decide they can no longer watch such videos, while others seek out alternative approaches to videos, perhaps different storylines told in a more female-friendly fashion.

In conclusion, although one could make a case for avoiding controversial media in the communication classroom, it has been my experience, in all these cases, that the benefits of showing such controversial media far outweigh the potential detriments. With proper preparation and debriefing, such texts can provide enhanced educational opportunities for the students to meet the course objectives, as well as gain information to improve their own lives.

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APPENDIX A
ABSOLUTELY FABULOUS

Absolutely Fabulous (AbFab for short) was watched by over 10 million people every week in Britain. It was so popular that a rock video about it shot to the top of the charts the week it was released. It also won several awards, including one from a women's group. Yet AbFab is also very controversial; there was speculation that it would never be shown in America because it is so "politically incorrect." Comedy Central, however, has shown it since 1995 with great success. According to Comedy Central, it is "the controversial hit British comedy that has class in a tasteless, classless kind of way."

Characters:

1. Edina Monsoon: 40 years old, owns a PR/Design/Fashion business. Edina is neurotic, alcoholic, and obsessed with keeping up with the times. Married twice, Edina has two children (one by each man). Her 1st husband, Martin, lives in L.A. and is in various kinds of recovery treatment. Her 2nd husband, Justin, is gay, and left Edina for another man, Oliver. Justin and Oliver run an antiques shop. The son, Serge, is never seen--he is at university. The daughter, Saffron (Saffie), lives with Edina. Edina is played by Jennifer Saunders, who also writes the series. Saunders is an established British comic, and is esp. known for French and Saunders, a show of comic sketches and parodies, ran for four years on BBC TV. Saunders has claimed that Edina has no socially redeeming qualities.

2. Patsy Stone: In her mid-forties, Patsy is Edina's best friend since they were in school together. Patsy is a fashion magazine director (though we hardly ever see her at work). She spends most of her time hanging around drinking, smoking cigarettes and joints, and having sex with "boy toys." She had a really rotten childhood with an extremely self-centered mother. Joanna Lumley plays Patsy. She is an accomplished stage and screen actress best known for glamorous roles. She is something of a "cult figure" in Britain, especially for her performance in The New Avengers. Patsy involves playing against type, as a parody of herself with her jaded fashion-victim look.

3. Saffron (Saffie) Monsoon: Edina's straight-laced, "prudish," ecosensitive, teetotaler daughter, who takes on the mothering role (as often happens with children of alcoholics). She goes from being a senior ("sixth former" attending "college") to a first year student at the local university. Her big decision is whether or not to move into the halls of residence. While Edina is proud of her son going to university, she condemns Saffie for such ambition, while Patsy mocks her. Saffie is played by Julia Sawalha, who is an accomplished British actress. As Saffron, she is made to look very unattractive, even dowdy.

4. Mother: Patsy's mother often comes over, primarily to see Saffie. She is able to provide Saffie with support, though she zings Edina frequently with little put-down lines. She becomes widowed as the series progresses. Mother is also portrayed as somewhat "dingy" and not quite with it. Mother is played by accomplished character actress June Whitfield, whose credits go back to radio drama.

5. Bubble: Edina's "bubble-headed" secretary. In her early twenties. She seems to have no brains or talents beyond looking right and being able to book lunches. She often loses things or breaks machinery (she has trouble remembering the right names for such machinery). Bubble is represented as a "space-cadet." Bubble is played by British character actress Jane Horrocks.

[continued]

Issues and Questions About the "Fat" Episode of Absolutely Fabulous

1. How does this episode of AbFab explore issues related to gender prescriptions for appearance in our society? How does it explore the powerful cultural pressure to be thin? Does this pressure affect men as strongly as it does women?

2. How are women and men portrayed in this show? What role(s) do the characters assume? What is the relationship(s) between women and men, women and women, men to men? Are these characters similar to women and men that you know?

3. Could you identify with the struggle of Edina to fit a particular image of fashionable thinness? Why or why not? If you are a woman, have you had similar struggles? If you are a man, have any of the women you know struggled with their weight (even if they aren't especially overweight)?

4. Julia Wood observes that many adult women rate losing weight more important than workplace success or romantic relationships (Gendered Lives, p. 167). How does this episode highlight this facts?

5. In general, how do clothes (fashion) and other such artifacts used as gender markers in our culture? How are such artifacts used in AbFab to explore issues regarding expectations feminine dressing? Are the preoccupations of the main characters with looking fashionable (whether or not they succeed) something that most women could identify with?

6. Does the show wind up challenging or reinforcing stereotypes related to clothing (fashion), thinness, dieting, and beauty in our culture? Is the satire in AbFab used to critique the way society forces women into a certain appearance? Or are the characters too caricaturized to make a useful critique? Explain.

7. Some have said that Edina and Patsy in AbFab are poor role models for girls (in their drinking, smoking, swearing, lifestyles, etc.). Would you agree with that assessment? If so, is their behavior (making nasty comments, being man-crazy, drinking and doing drugs, etc.?) problematic? Will teenage girls copy their behavior? Or do you think the characters are too "over-the-top" to serve as role models? Perhaps the satirical humor can be seen as a subversion of "correct" sex-role behavior? Explain.

8. Is the character of Saffron (Edina's daughter) one which is more appropriate as a model of identification? Why or why not? Do you think she has a more "realistic" view of physical appearance, or is she being naive?

9. Why do you think Jennifer Saunders did the dream sequence in this episode of AbFab? Does such horrific exaggerated imagery call stereotypes of beauty and appearance into question, pointing out the ludicrousness of any woman attempting to mutilate herself for the sake of beauty?

10. Is it possible to have a negotiated or oppositional reading of situation comedies? What is the role of humor in society? More specifically, is AbFab really subversive to concepts about class and gender? If so, how? In general, based on this episode, do you think the show represents a step forward in the portrayal of women, or a step backwards? Explain.

APPENDIX B
SLIM HOPES: ADVERTISING AND THE OBSESSION WITH THINNESS

Before viewing the video, read the following:

1. J. Wood, Gendered Lives, chapter 9
2. Dines & Humez, eds., Gender, Race and Class in Media, Packet #1 (on reserve)
   a. G. Steinem, "Sex, Lies, and Advertising"
   b. J. Kilbourne, "The Beauty and the Beast of Advertising"

1. What are some of the myths about gender that are promulgated through advertising? How can we see those myths in the advertisements seen in "Slim Hopes" and other examples?

2. Wood, Steinem, and Kilbourne argue that media present unrealistic and unhealthy stereotyped images of both women and men and that this can be harmful in a variety of ways. Do you agree? Why or why not?

3. From all these readings, and the video, how do advertising images reinforce "the beauty myth," and especially the slender body for women? Is this reinforcement as problematic as these authors suggest? Why or why not?

4. Have media images of women and men has changed over the years to the present day? Is today's image "better" or "worse" than prior years? Justify your response.

5. Many scholars would agree with the statement that "mediated sources affect the way people view themselves." Thinking of your own particular gender-identity, how have such things as cartoons, music, magazines, advertisements, films, TV shows, etc. influenced your self-concept and self-esteem? How do the ways in which you consume media images today tell you about yourself right now?

6. It is argued that media forms often present cultural values, including gender-ideals and expectations, in a stereotypical manner. Explain how media uses images, especially from advertising, to reinforce sex/gender stereotypes, and the predominant gender-ideology of our culture. Would you agree that such imagery has a powerful influence on our identities and behavior? Why or why not?

7. After watching the video documentary, answer the question of how does the media continue to denigrate, trivialize, and/or symbolically annihilate women (following Tuchman) in the 1990s?

APPENDIX C
THELMA AND LOUISE (1991)

Be sure to read the Thelma and Louise reviews prior to watching the film (packet on reserve). Then consider the following questions for discussion:

1. What was the controversy surrounding the film Thelma and Louise? What does it have to do with women's images in the media?

2. What was your own personal reaction to the film? Was it "male bashing," as many critics claimed? Or was it a progressive step forward in how women are portrayed in the media? What did you think about the ending? Was it "bad" or "good"? Explain.

3. Callie Khouri (the screenwriter) argued that the characters weren't meant to be role models, but simply as criminals who happened to be women. Does this help justify the characters' violent actions? Or the ending? Why or why not?

4. This film can be viewed as part of a genre of "buddy road pictures," which usually feature men on a journey (sometimes with women as companions) to find themselves or to escape the law. Some other examples include Easy Rider, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Bonnie & Clyde, plus various modern examples like Natural Born Killers. Increasingly, women have been paired in such films. Does this alter or extend the genre in any way (does it reaffirm or subvert the genre conventions)? How so?

5. Do Thelma and Louise act like what we expect for same-sex friends? For example, is it a violation of expected female friendship when Louise refuses to self-disclose to Thelma what happened to her in Texas? Etc.

6. What stereotypes of expected gender roles are in this film? What violations of expected gender roles occur? In addition to the leads, consider the "good cop," the FBI men, the highway patrol officer, J.D., the women's violent acts, Thelma's husband, etc.

7. Other films released in 1991 had violent female characters (such as Terminator 2 and Batman Returns). Yet these films did not generate the public outcry that greeted Thelma and Louise. Indeed, Catwoman, who gruesomely murders a man, was seen by the Kansas City Star reviewer as a "positive feminist role model." What happened here? Why was Thelma and Louise singled out, and not the others? Did people overreact to this film? If so, how and why?

Characters in Thelma and Louise:

Thelma Dickerson (housewife)
Louise Sawyer (waitress)
Hal Slocum ("good cop")
J.D. (the hitchhiker)
Lewd truck driver
The Rasta bicyclist
Darryl Dickerson (Thelma's husband, a salesman)
Jimmy (Louise's musician boyfriend)
Harlan Puckett (the rapist)
Max (the F.B.I. leader)
Highway patrol officer
The cowboy bar waitress

APPENDIX D

DREAMWORLDS II: DESIRE, SEX AND POWER IN MUSIC VIDEO

Read the following prior to viewing the video:

1. J. Wood, Gendered Lives, chapters 9 and 10
2. A. Kuhn, "Lawless Seeing" from The Power of the Image (on reserve)

1. "Dreamworlds" presents an oppositional reading of MTV rock videos, showing how such videos demean and sexually objectify women. Using Tuchman's and/or Kilbourne's categories, show how this objectification occurs.

2. Would you agree with the premise that the vision of women created by rock videos is a harmful one? Why or why not?

3. There are those that would argue that the images of women in music and advertising are similar to those in pornography. Using Kuhn's criteria, would you agree or disagree and why?

4. Some argue that the presumed harmful effects to society and individuals whenever popular culture employs sexist/racist imagery, especially in advertising, music, and pornography, justify restricting or banning such imagery. Would you agree, in part or totally? Explain why or why not.

5. If media images are indeed sexist and racist, demeaning to both men and women of all types, then what are some of the ways in which these images can be resisted or changed? Would the resistance work? If changed, would they be as effective? Why or why not?

6. Why does Wood criticize violence and sexual aggression against women in the media? Would you agree with her assessment? Why or why not? Does what happens in the media affect how average men and women define themselves and what is normal in a relationship? Why or why not?

7. Wood argues that media present unrealistic and unhealthy images of both women and men and that this can be harmful in a variety of ways. What are some examples she provides to support this claim? Do you agree? Why or why not?

8. One could argue that having "girl groups," no matter what their portrayal, was better than having no female artists. Which do you think is better--a negative portrayal (dependent, interested only in boys, etc.), or no portrayal? Why?

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